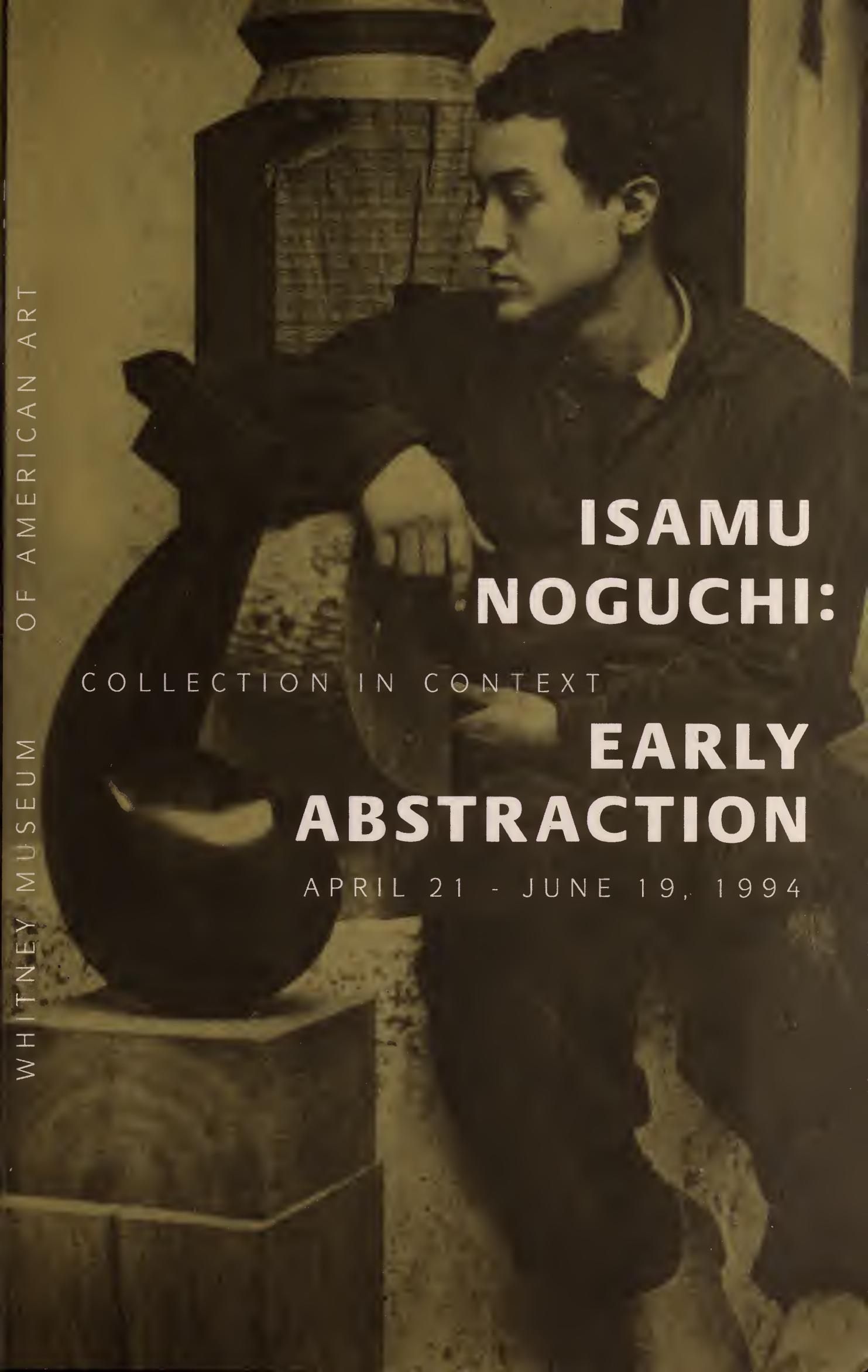


WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART



ISAMU
NOGUCHI:
COLLECTION IN CONTEXT
EARLY
ABSTRACTION

APRIL 21 - JUNE 19, 1994

Since the Whitney Museum's opening in 1931, the art of Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) has been featured in nearly fifty exhibitions. Noguchi's work first entered the Permanent Collection in that opening year and is now represented by eleven sculptures and four drawings. Three of these drawings, generously donated by The Isamu Noguchi Foundation in honor of the artist's ninetieth birthday, are featured in the current exhibition. "Isamu Noguchi: Early Abstraction" highlights a little-known body of drawings completed by the artist after a short apprenticeship with sculptor Constantin Brancusi in 1927 while on a Guggenheim Fellowship in Paris. These unabashedly simplified gouaches were exhibited shortly after Noguchi's return to New York in 1929, but they have not been publicly seen since.

As with the work of most sculptors, Noguchi's drawings are thought of as secondary expressions of his talent. The purpose of this exhibition is not to assert the primacy of his skills as a draftsman, although they are impressive, but to provide a sense of Noguchi's earliest aesthetic sources and impulses and to offer an even broader view of his accomplishments. He was, after all, an artist of considerable scope, whose sculptural contributions range from the design of public parks and monuments, to theater sets, lamps, and furniture, all of which have been well documented and widely viewed. In addition to filling a gap in our knowledge of the artist's work, this exhibition demonstrates that Noguchi's drawings are not merely studies for, or even equivalents to, his sculptures, but that they are crucial vehicles for assimilating aesthetic influences from the past and projecting artistic ideas into the future.

The Whitney Museum's "Collection in Context" series highlights specific aspects of works in all media from the Permanent Collection. Sometimes these exhibitions isolate a single masterwork for intensive analysis; at other times, as in the present case, they examine a singular body of work by one artist. Nonetheless, as the series title suggests, the purpose of these exhibitions is not to separate key works from an artist's oeuvre but to reconnect them in new ways and to reinstate little known or "lost" works in order to offer a more complete, candid view of an artist's creative endeavors. The Museum is fortunate to be able to present this exhibition concurrently with "Ideas and Objects: Drawings and Sculptures from the Permanent Collection." Seeing Noguchi's early abstractions in counterpoint to the works in this exhibition further contextualizes his drawing in relationship to the art of his contemporaries and of successive generations of sculptors.

"Isamu Noguchi: Early Abstraction" is co-organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art and The Isamu Noguchi Foundation. The curators, Bruce Altshuler and myself, would like to express our appreciation to Priscilla Morgan and Shoji Sadao for their enthusiastic support of this undertaking and to Bonnie Rychlak, registrar at The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, and Margaret Laster, curatorial assistant at the Whitney Museum, for their efforts in the realization of this project.

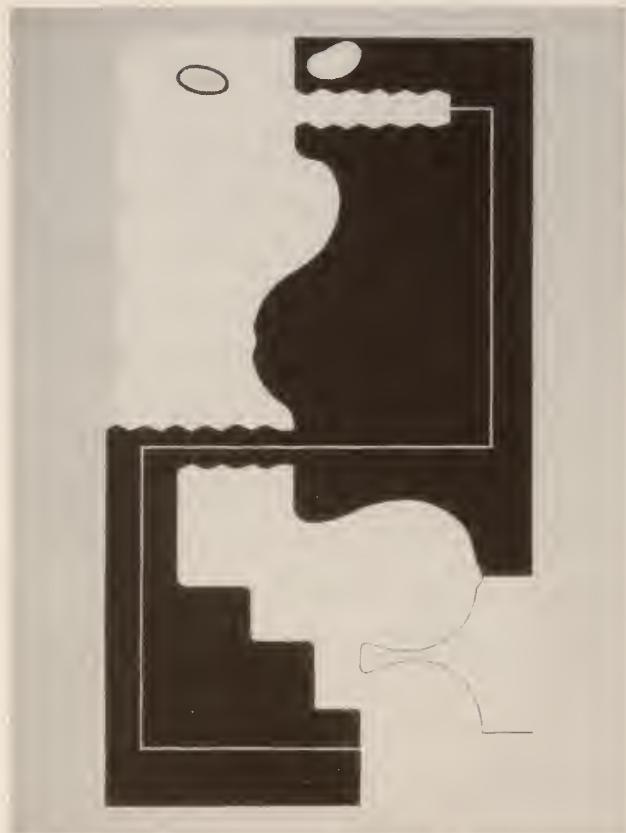
Adam D. Weinberg, Curator, Permanent Collection

ISAMU NOGUCHI: EARLY ABSTRACTION

On March 30, 1927, a young American artist arrived in Paris from New York. Like others of his generation, the twenty-two-year-old Isamu Noguchi had come to learn at first hand the lessons of European modernism. But Noguchi disembarked with a unique mix of cultural baggage, a background in Japan and America that prepared him well for a ready assimilation of reductive abstraction and for direct techniques of carving and construction. His apprenticeship was conducted under the master of this genre, Constantin Brancusi, whose aesthetic attitudes would long remain a model for Noguchi. Noguchi's synthetic intelligence, however, also embraced other elements of the Parisian scene. This exhibition captures Noguchi in search of his own voice within these modes. We see here the experimentation in black and white gouache, done after he left Brancusi's studio, which led to his first abstract sculptures.

Noguchi had seen Brancusi's sculpture in December 1926 at the Brummer Gallery in New York, in an exhibition organized by Marcel Duchamp. He later wrote that this exhibition made him feel "that everything I had done in my work was false. It filled me with longing to seek after my own true identity." What Noguchi had done before was academic figurative sculpture, modeled with the natural facility that would characterize his wide-ranging production for the rest of his career. Now he was moved to seek an artistic identity that merged Asian traditions with those of Western modernism. As Noguchi stated in applying for the Guggenheim Fellowship that brought him to Paris, his goal was to be "an interpreter of the East to the West" through sculpture, as his poet father had been through poetry.

Isamu's father, Yonejiro (Yone) Noguchi, had left Japan at age nineteen and developed a reputation among the bohemian San Francisco poets for his imagistic verse. Isamu's mother, Leonie Gilmour, was an American writer making her way in New York in 1901, when she answered a newspaper advertisement for someone to assist a Japanese poet with his English prose. By the time Isamu was born on November 17, 1904, Yone had returned to a teaching position in Japan and Leonie had moved from New York to her mother's house in Los Angeles for the birth of her child. Two years later, Leonie took Isamu with her to Tokyo to rejoin Yone, but the relationship did not last. The independent Leonie, however, remained in Japan with her young son, teaching English to make ends meet and eventually moving out of Tokyo to the seaside town of Chigasaki. Isamu grew up with Japanese playmates, and when he was ten he was informally apprenticed to the carpenter at work on Leonie's new house. Here Isamu developed the love of hand tools and simple methods of construction that would be recast as modernist tenets in the studio of Brancusi. More broadly, his early years in Japan yielded aesthetic dispositions that would draw



Paris Abstraction [7028], c. 1927-28

him to many facets of the modernist enterprise: an attraction to simplicity of form and structure, the impulse to integrate art with the everyday environment, and a proclivity toward abstraction. All of these also would be reinforced by Noguchi's apprenticeship with Brancusi.

When he was thirteen, Isamu was sent back to the United States for schooling in rural Indiana. The Japanese youth became an American adolescent, paper route and all. Under the tutelage of progressive educator Edward Rumely, Noguchi was directed toward premedical studies at Columbia. But with his mother's encouragement

on her return to New York in 1924 he began to study art. Isamu soon left Columbia to work with Onorio Ruotolo at the Leonardo da Vinci School of Art on Avenue A, changing his surname from that of his mother, Gilmour, to that of his father, Noguchi, as he committed himself to sculpture. He quickly established a reputation as a skilled academic sculptor. But the restless Noguchi roamed beyond the conservative salons of the New York art world. In the progressive galleries of Alfred Stieglitz and J.B. Neumann, he found the modern art that would transform his ambitions.

After learning that his work had been admired by a member of the Guggenheim family, in January 1927 Noguchi applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship to spend three years abroad. His program called for an initial year in Paris, where he would learn to carve stone and wood and would acquire some knowledge of European culture. He then planned to travel to Asia, first to India and China, and then to Japan, returning to the land of his father armed with the newest tools of Western art. The aesthetic aspiration that Noguchi expressed in his Guggenheim proposal was prescient. For this future sculptor of gardens and landscapes sought to "view nature through nature's eyes...[to] so thoroughly submerge himself in the study of the unity of nature as to truly become...a part of the very earth."

Within weeks of arriving in Paris, Noguchi was taken to meet Brancusi by American writer Robert McAlmon. He already had obtained a studio of his own at 7 rue Belloni (now rue d'Arsonval) through the Japanese artist Foujita. But Noguchi did not want to begin any sculpture until he had gained the

carving skills that he lacked, and to acquire these he appealed to Brancusi, to whom he went after finding the École des Beaux-Arts to be unsatisfactory. Accepted as a studio assistant, Noguchi learned to cut and dress marble and French cathedral stone, to handle the ax and saw with which Brancusi carved wood, and to lovingly sharpen the tools of his trade. He also experienced the older sculptor's commitment and perfectionism, his exhortation to treat every piece as if it were the best work that one ever would do.

Brancusi's role as exemplar went beyond such generalities, for here Noguchi saw direct carving and undisguised facture as moral imperatives. A dramatic contrast to the artificiality of academic sculpture, this honesty of process and structure in Brancusi echoed the early lessons Noguchi had learned from that traditional Japanese carpenter in Chigasaki. Also refit in modernist garb was the Japanese integration of art and design, as Noguchi saw the furnishings and utensils that Brancusi had created for himself at 8 Impasse Ronsin. With this background, Noguchi would have no need of the Bauhaus to legitimate his developing conception of sculpture as the creation of the lived environment.

Although Brancusi urged Noguchi to focus on his work, the social young man was drawn to the lively community of artists in Montparnasse. Since he spoke little French, Noguchi spent his time with the American artists who flocked to Paris in the twenties. After assisting Brancusi in the morning, he spent the afternoon with other Americans at the life drawing sessions at the Académie Colarossi and the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. Each evening there was the spirited café scene, where the crowds at the Dôme and the Coupole were filled with American artists and writers. At the drawing sessions,

he met Marion Greenwood, who in 1936 would involve Noguchi in the decoration of the Abelardo Rodriguez Market in Mexico City, resulting in his first large work of public art. He also met Andrée Ruellan, whose dinners on the rue Vercingétorix attracted many artists, including her neighbor, Stuart Davis, as well as the hungry Noguchi. And he saw much of Alexander (Sandy) Calder, who created his miniature circus that first year Noguchi was in France. But the first American with whom he fraternized was Morris Kantor, in whose studio Noguchi painted during his early weeks in Paris.



Paris Abstraction [7016], c. 1927-28



Paris Abstraction [7020], c. 1927-28

Looking at some of the drawings in the exhibition, we see that painting was not far from Noguchi's mind during this period. There is one piece that evokes contemporary Purism—the work of Léger, Ozenfant, and Le Corbusier—a rectangular image constructed of palette- and breastlike forms. Another drawing is very close to the planar backgrounds of Stuart Davis' *Eggbeater* series. Davis had brought a few examples to Paris and Noguchi in all likelihood would have seen them. Others recall the imagery of French advertising,

the elongated forms of Modigliani, and the sinuous line of Arp's reliefs. But Noguchi had come to Paris to make sculpture, and it is to prospective sculptural forms that most of these drawings allude.

Noguchi referred to his gouache drawings in a December 1927 report to the Guggenheim Foundation as "studies in sculptural outline," and in some of them we see the imagery that he soon would bring into three dimensions. The first sculpture that Noguchi created in Paris was a marble sphere with one quarter removed, which appears in the drawing as a black sectional profile supporting a white curve with indented edge. Another drawing includes a sculpture, now lost, which is shown in a photograph of Noguchi in the Brancusi-like studio environment he created for himself (see cover). Other images suggest forms right out of Brancusi—from the profile of a tall curve on a rectangular base to the image of what itself seems to be a base made by Brancusi.

Noguchi assisted Brancusi for about five months, although his working apprenticeship effectively ended in July 1927, when Brancusi's studio floor collapsed during a heavy rainstorm. By the late fall, Noguchi was putting his ideas for sculpture into strong gouache silhouette, and assembling a "traveling laboratory" of tools and equipment for use in Asia. With the renewal of his fellowship in 1928, he began sculptural work in earnest, in a new studio at 11 rue Dedouvre in Gentilly. This intense period of work resulted in twenty-two abstract sculptures. (Only six of these sculptures are known to have survived, the rest apparently lost in the United States after his return.) It is not surprising that many of these works took off from Brancusi—idealized forms carved in stone and wood as well as polished metal sculptures like *Foot Tree*, which is seen here along with its more footlike inspiration in black gouache.

Intersecting the influence of Brancusi was a formal impulse that pushed Noguchi in two seemingly opposite directions—toward the rigors of geometry and toward the sensuousness of organic form. The former led to the kind of rectilinear drawings that are included in this exhibition, and to the sheet brass sculpture *Leda*, whose interlocking construction recalls the Japanese joinery of his youth. (Noguchi would reclaim this method of construction in the biomorphic sculptures of interlocking stone slabs that brought him critical attention in New York during the 1940s.) Noguchi's affinity for the organic can be seen in the delicate, leaflike forms that evoke the botanical texts he collected at the time, and in the sculpture *Positional Shape*, which can be displayed in any of three directions. This sculpture is one of a number of innovative pieces that Noguchi created in 1928, including a work of brass and wire whose elements hung in tension (done three years before his friend Calder's first kinetic abstraction), and what seems to have been the first proposal for a neon sculpture.

Experimentation with new materials and techniques remained characteristic of Noguchi's work and, as with the coexistence of the organic and the geometric, it would survive alongside a contrasting impulse toward the archaic. Noguchi's lifelong artistic enterprise can in fact be viewed as moving between apparent opposites that

he embraced in his ongoing search for self-definition. His choice of mentors instantiates a similar pattern. Following Brancusi there would be R. Buckminster Fuller, the technological visionary whom he would meet on his return to New York in 1929.

It is hard not to see this dialectical mode as rooted in Noguchi's mixed ethnicity and in his personal history, a background structured by oppositions rather than unities: emotional conflict between American mother and Japanese father, a Japanese childhood and an American adolescence, experiences of racial intolerance in both Japan and America. Intensifying it all was paternal rejection, and a six-year separation from his mother after she had sent him off to America. Noguchi was left to forge his own sense of self, and his quest for

personal and artistic identity assumed the bipolar mode of its generating conditions. With regard to his ethnic identity, the process would be a particularly difficult one, for he long would be viewed as a Japanese artist in America, and as an American in Japan. Only in his peripatetic internationalism did Noguchi eventually achieve a kind of resolution.

Noguchi's time in Paris was a defining moment for his artistic personality, fixing his commitment to modernism and his association with one of its mythic founders. He had come to Paris to escape the art of the human figure, believing that in modernist abstraction lay the spirit of his age. But although Noguchi stuck with modernism, he would drop abstraction, for these drawings and sculptures of 1927–28 were the last such work he did for quite a while. Ironically, this student of Brancusi, having created the first significant body of work that he could call his own, would completely change course on returning to New York.



Foot Tree, 1928



Paris Abstraction [7015], c. 1927-28

Although Noguchi did spend a month at the British Museum studying Asian art, he made little progress toward the East and his fellowship was not renewed for a third year. By March 1929 he was back in New York, and in April his Paris abstractions were exhibited at the gallery of architect Eugene Schoen. Despite a positive reception there were no sales. (In striking contrast was the sold-out exhibition of figurative work by his friend Morris Kantor the previous year at the Brummer Gallery.) Disconsolate and in need of an income, Noguchi repudiated the world of Brancusi and reclaimed his academic skills to make a living through portrait sculpture.

Noguchi's abandonment of abstraction involved more than financial exigency, however. For Noguchi was hard pressed by Oedipal forces, with a profound case of the anxiety of influence complicated by the fact that his first artistic model was the father who had spurned him. Reacting to Brancusi's powerful example, feeling angry and insecure, Noguchi returned to figuration. But he retained the modernist ideals of his mentor, concepts that would be combined with those of R. Buckminster Fuller and Martha Graham to form the background for Noguchi's artistic maturity.

Noguchi eventually would return to abstraction, via utopian landscape designs set within the environment of daily use. And in the first of his large landscape projects to actually be built, the 1956–58 gardens of the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, he included a seating area that directly evoked the forms of Brancusi. Here Noguchi paid tribute to the site of his youthful venture into abstraction, his initial effort to establish an identity within the precincts of the modern. The promise of Noguchi's Paris abstractions, however, was not fulfilled for half a century. Bringing the story full circle, their potential would be realized in Japan, with the great basalt and granite sculptures of the artist's last years.

Bruce Altshuler, Director, The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches, height precedes width precedes depth.

The bracketed numbers following the titles of the drawings are inventory numbers assigned by The Isamu Noguchi Foundation. They have been retained here as a means of identifying the drawings.

Drawings

Paris Abstraction [7000], 1927
Gouache on paper, 25 1/2 x 19 5/8
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York

*Paris Abstraction [7000*2-35]*, c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
Private collection

*Paris Abstraction [7000*5-35]*, c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
Private collection

*Paris Abstraction [7000*7-35]*, c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
Private collection

*Paris Abstraction [7000*11-35]*, c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
Private collection

Paris Abstraction [7004], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 11/16 x 19 11/16
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc. 94.31

Paris Abstraction [7005], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York

Paris Abstraction [7006], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York

Paris Abstraction [7007], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York

Paris Abstraction [7009], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York

Paris Abstraction [7010], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York

Paris Abstraction [7012], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York

Paris Abstraction [7015], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York

Paris Abstraction [7016], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York

Paris Abstraction [7017], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York

Paris Abstraction [7018], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 11/16 x 19 3/4
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc. 94.32

Paris Abstraction [7019], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York

Paris Abstraction [7020], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 5/8 x 19 3/4
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc. 94.33

Paris Abstraction [7022], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc.,
Long Island City, New York

Paris Abstraction [7028], c. 1927-28
Gouache on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc.,
Long Island City, New York

Sculptures

Foot Tree, 1928
Gold-plated brass and marble base,
29 x 10 1/4 x 8 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc.,
Long Island City, New York

Leda, 1928
Gold-plated brass and marble base,
23 3/8 x 14 1/4 x 11
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc.,
Long Island City, New York

Positional Shape, 1928
Gold-plated brass and marble base,
23 x 21 x 8 3/4
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc.,
Long Island City, New York

This exhibition is supported by the Lobby
Gallery Associates and the National
Endowment for the Arts.

Cover: Isamu Noguchi in his studio, Gentilly, France,
c. 1928-29

Photograph credits:
Geoffrey Clements, *Paris Abstraction* [7020];
Kevin Noble, *Paris Abstraction* [7028], *Paris*
Abstraction [7016], *Paris Abstraction* [7015]

Brochure design: (cover and format) Design Writing
Research; (Noguchi) Marion Delhees

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A minimalist interior scene featuring a dark, abstract sculpture on a rectangular pedestal. The sculpture consists of a vertical black bar with two horizontal arms extending from its top. The pedestal sits on a light-colored, curved platform. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

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